

INQUIRY MAGAZINE
27 November 1978

INQUIRY IS ANYBODY WATCHING?

By DAVID WISE

IF VARIOUS INTELLIGENCE specialists in Washington—at the White House, the CIA, the Pentagon, and on Capitol Hill—are correct, a man named John McMahon has almost nothing to do these days. McMahon is the CIA's Deputy Director for Operations, known around the shop as the DDO.

As such, he is Jimmy Carter's Richard Helms, the man in charge of such matters as overthrowing governments and rigging elections; in former days his responsibilities might have included assassinating Fidel Castro or making his beard fall off. Mr. McMahon is relatively new on the job, having replaced William W. "Wild Willy" Wells, the previous chief of dirty tricks, who was caught up in the Great Purge of the clandestine services that CIA director Stansfield Turner initiated on Halloween, 1977.

Wherever one goes in Washington amid the "intelligence community" (a homey phrase that conjures up visions of neatly trimmed lawns and outdoor barbecues), one hears the same story: the CIA is not doing very much in the way of covert operations these days. Mr. McMahon, a stocky, white-haired man whose name is only whispered in Washington, can of course occupy his time with other pursuits; he is also the official in charge of CIA spying.

But exploding cigars, poison pills, amphibious invasions, that sort of thing, the covert operators insist, just isn't going on—very much. And the reason, the intelligence types confide in the next breath, is not merely the bad publicity generated by the Church committee and by all the disclosures in the press. The real reason, they say, is the laws and rules requiring the CIA to report any secret operations to eight committees of the House and Senate. This, the intelligence agents assert, makes it very difficult to keep secret operations secret. The Hughes-Ryan Amendment, a law enacted in 1974, requires that six committees be notified of covert operations; the Senate and House intelligence committees

A first-hand examination of the congressional oversight committees raises a disturbing question: Does *oversee* now mean *overlook*?

were added to the list when they were established after 1974.

On the face of it, then, it might appear that the mere existence of congressional machinery to monitor the CIA and the other intelligence agencies has had a salutary if unanticipated effect: The spooks, we are to believe, have put away their cloaks and daggers because they don't like the bother.

In fact it would be naive to assume that the CIA has altogether stopped doing what comes naturally. No doubt there are fewer covert operations today than in the swashbuckling fifties and sixties. But Senator Gary Hart, a member of the Senate Intelligence Committee, is on record as saying the White House notified the committee of six covert operations in the panel's first year. Since the committee is now more than two years old, the mathematical likelihood is that at least a dozen secret CIA operations have been reported to its members.

Both the Senate and House committees are worried, however, about what they are *not* being told. It is clear, for example, that the CIA did not tell Congress the truth about covert operations in Angola. There is a good deal of backstage pulling and hauling going on right now between the intelligence agencies and the committees over the reporting procedures for covert operations. Most of the infighting is conducted in the greatest secrecy, and the details are rather murky. But the silent

str
syn
ho
eve
wh

en
Ch
Vi
dia
In
ing
sa
W
sig

in
at
off

Mondale's office. At age 50 he retains the same quality of boyish sincerity, and almost the same youthful appearance, that helped him defeat Homer Capehart back in 1962.

"It's a quantum leap over what there was before," Bayh continues, "but that isn't saying very much because there wasn't much oversight." Bayh is right about that. In the old days, the Senate's idea of watchdogging the CIA was epitomized by Georgia's Richard Brevard Russell, who once observed that some of the secret things he had been told "chill the marrow of a man to hear about," and who suggested it would be better to close up the CIA than let Congress know the details of its operations.

Bayh chooses his words carefully. "We've achieved, perhaps the best word is a respectable relationship between the committee and the agencies." But he agreed there is a danger "that we will inadvertently become compromised so that we are no longer overseers but yes-sayers."

How many covert operations have been reported to the committee since Bayh took over as chairman from Senator Daniel K. Inouye of Hawaii last January?

"I won't give numbers. But they have not been voluminous."

Was he satisfied he was being told all?

"Yes. If there is a question, it is over how much detail is given to us, some of the specifics. Admiral Turner did call me over Labor Day weekend about two or three things. He wanted to come up to the office. We talked on a

DAVID WISE is the author of *The American Police State* and other books about the intelligence agencies. He is an associate of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, and lectures in political science at the University of California, Santa Barbara.